

D No: 16823-ISA

Assigned to: _____

Project No: 9899

Contract No: DAHC15 67 C 0158

Task Order No: _____

RAND DOCUMENT

IMPACT OF THE VC WINTER-SPRING OFFENSIVE

Daniel Ellsberg

March 8, 1968

For RAND Use Only

DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE IN EXTERNAL RAND PUBLICATIONS OR CORRESPONDENCE

-1-

I have been asked within ISA to set down, in brief, my views of the immediate course of the war. The opinions below will sound extreme; yet they represent fairly my best judgment on events. I am more confident of some projections than others, but all are speculative. Most were formed in the first days of the Tet offensive, without any access to official reporting. But what little reporting I have seen in the last two days has not modified them.

The Hope of Victory

In terms of our earliest, most ambitious objectives (a Malayan-type victory, with the Communist apparatus almost wholly destroyed or "faded away") -- or even, most of our less ambitious goals -- I think that the war is over; those aims are lost. I expect the Tet offensive -- and those events I am quite sure will follow in the next two months -- to have decisive impact on the course of the war, decisively foreclosing most evolutions favorable to us.

Two months ago, though I did not foresee a favorable outcome from the policies we were following, I believed that changes in U.S. policy aimed at changing GVN/ARVN nature and policy -- toward a GVN with greater nationalistic appeal and respectability, an RVNAF better led, better motivated, and better organized to fight VC local forces and guerillas -- could probably bring about substantial, lasting improvement in the non-Communist circumstances relative to those of the last four or five years. As of this month, I no longer believe in that possibility. Two months

from now, I expect the reasons for this to be widely evident. By that time, things are going to get much worse; and then, they will not get better.

The Fate of the Contested Area

The VC winter-spring offensive undoubtedly has several major goals; but none, I suspect, is more important than one toward which we have yet seen only the first moves: the takeover of the countryside. From the point of view of this aim, attacks on the cities are just a (compelling) diversion, inexorably sucking RVNAF (and some U.S.) forces toward the environs of the towns and cities, away from the hamlets and outlying regions: just as the threat of Khe Sanh and the borders has served, so far, mainly to distract U.S. attention and to some extent resources away from the rest of the country. I think the main event is still to come, not, this time, in a one-night offensive but in a week-by-week expulsion of GVN presence and influence from the rural areas: showing up on the pacification maps as a "red tide" flowing up to the edges of the province and district towns (and flowing over some of them).

This will wait till RVNAF has redeployed out of the previously-contested RD areas toward the towns; another wave of attacks on the cities may be needed to assure this and nail it down. Then the VC will simply walk in, making an appearance in every hamlet RD Cadre have ever worked in, trying and executing those GVN-backed officials and supporters who did not leave with the troops and Cadre. PF posts and RD Cadre teams left isolated

will be destroyed, without RVNAF support; and (a new phenomenon) some units may well defect on being surrounded.

Relative Strengths

When they arrive, the VC will draft recruits; thus, one result of their advances will be to bring them a new recruiting base, from which they will more readily replace their losses in the recent offensive. (Incidentally, of those lost in the campaign, how many of them had been reflected at all in our current Order of Battle estimates? I.e., how long had they been actively working for the Front? Some prisoners claim to have been impressed only days or weeks earlier.) The probable result, in my opinion, is a VC OB (and militia) larger 3-6 months from now than their actual strength was three months ago (which was probably larger than our estimates).

Meanwhile, despite mobilization decrees, RVNAF will probably be considerably smaller. We don't know yet what the real desertion rate is running; I suspect it is high and will increase after the next wave of attacks and the erosions to come in the countryside (especially if any strong attempt is made -- at U.S. urging -- to keep them in the contested areas, or on the offensive). My guess is that when the smoke clears a couple of months from now (if it does), RVNAF will be at most 75-80% of its actual strength in December 1967, and quite possibly closer to 60%. The National Police will erode comparably, as will the RD Cadre (unless they remain on the payroll in the towns rather than the hamlets). In short, the VC almost

certainly will recover (and advance) in strength, morale and effectiveness from what MACV and Alsop call "their costly failure" very much sooner than the GVN will, if it ever does.

Pacification

The Tet offensive and what is shortly to come do not mark a "setback" to pacification; it is the death of pacification, as it has been conceived.

Neither in hamlets nor, now, in towns, will anyone ever again doubt even slightly the VC motto, "If we go, for a while, we'll be back." Nor will anyone believe again, even slightly, a GVN claim: "We have come to stay," or: "We will never leave you unprotected."

Before two months are out, the odds are that U.S. sub-sector teams will be withdrawn from a number of districts; and a number of province towns will be under siege. Some will have fallen.

Driven from the "contested" areas (along with RF and PF) the Cadre will retain little of their former functions, though they will add to the defense of the towns, serve as bodyguards to officials (with more justification than before) and (usefully) help with refugees and rebuilding. Most of them will never return, as Cadre, to the hamlets.

It was already true, during the past two years, that VC provincial and district forces were too strong in most areas to make any RD progress claimed more than temporary or illusory. Soon it will be impossible even to pretend

otherwise, and I expect the pretense will cease. Nor will ARVN battalions be devoted much longer, in the role of PF's, to shoring up Potemkin villages, or (as in Binh Dinh) Potemkin districts.

This would mean no more than the loss of an illusion, if ARVN buckled down to the crucial offensive job of chasing district companies and (with U.S. help) provincial battalions. But, as currently led, motivated, and influenced at the top by MACV (and that is unlikely to change), ARVN is not about to do that, less likely than before, in the new, more dangerous environment to come about in the countryside. In that environment, informers will clam up, or be killed; the VC will get more information and cooperation, the GVN less; officials and police -- now subject, with their families, to assassination even in towns and cities -- will be much less willing to act on information on VC suspects and activities, even though VC Cadre will operate much more overtly.

The VC will organize effective militia self-defense groups in hamlets formerly "contested" or "GVN-controlled," improving on defenses started by RD Cadre. From these they will observe, harass and resist RVNAF moves. This will call down U.S. air and artillery on the villages (as on the cities, recently) which will not return those villages to the GVN camp! Nor will the news from relatives in the city, who fled from the VC advance to be subjected to U.S. bombs and shells in the towns and then (predictably) neglected by the GVN, provide a powerful attraction to the GVN cause.

Assassinations and demoralization of officials will turn GVN apathy into paralysis in the rural districts, where an administrative presence persists at all. The VC will probably use their new militia to harass and block roads much more than before, imposing an economic blockade on the towns. Thus, where a spirit of resistance to the VC still burns, it is likely to take the form of resisting siege, not of "expanding control."

ARVN units will continue, often, to defend themselves when attacked in their fixed basis, taking and inflicting casualties, but only on the defense. They will not (except, perhaps, for Marines, Airborne and some Rangers) challenge the VC offensively out in the countryside (unless, unforeseeably, their leadership and motivation are transformed). If pressed to do so, they will desert.

In short, I am forced to predict not only that the "blue" area will contract in the next few months and the "red" zone expand -- a red advance comparable to that of late 1963 - early 1964, from which it never really receded -- but that the new red on the maps will never go back. Not without, say 400,000 more U.S. troops: which would push it back to the maps of 1966. (A total U.S. force of 1.5-2 million in the South could do much more than that: while it remained.)

The Cities

The GVN will not rise to the challenge. It will not take care of the urban refugees adequately: who will be material for VC organization on a scale unprecedented in the cities. VC agit-prop teams will make

good use of the destruction wrought by the U.S. especially given the foreseeable (and it appears, widespread) belief among the Vietnamese that these momentous happenings must have reflected U.S. will and collusion with the VC (on the axiom, "Nothing major happens that the U.S. didn't want.")

The GVN will not move (now will we force them) toward a Government of National Union; rather, their current arrests of oppositionists further isolate and discredit them, and foreshadow the emasculation of the Assembly and the undoing of all promising political developments of the last year (one more neat result of the VC offensive).

In the opinion of Tran Ngoc Chau (on leave in the U.S. from the Lower House during the attacks), the recent offensive probably was made possible by a newly friendly or apathetic urban environment, and a broad low-level cooperative organization that had not existed on the same scale before: an environment dating in Hue from 1966, but in Saigon and elsewhere, only for the last six months or so (i.e., from the election of Thieu and Ky). If true -- that the attacks were neither mere raids nor used up long-existing assets, but reflect new VC opportunities and capability in the cities -- the impact of the attacks themselves, the U.S. military response, and the GVN political response, should still further improve growing weather for the VC in the cities. Even if the political make-up of the GVN should change as I would like to see it (which seems most unlikely), it may well be that VC penetration in the cities has now gone or will soon go too far for real non-Communist political mobilization to develop.

Khe Sanh

The fate of Khe Sanh seems to depend on the judgment of Ho Chi Minh and GIAP: who have, wittingly or not, risked and brought on U.S. escalation in the past (Pleiku: NVA infiltration), and who have just proven their willingness to take high casualties for big psychological results. Chau was sure that Khe Sanh was a diversion: that Giap would not make the "mistake" of over-running Khe Sanh and "unifying the U.S." I am less sure Giap would judge that, or that he would be wrong to doubt it. Out of the blue, yes; the destruction of Khe Sanh would surely enflame the U.S. to greater effort: but in the context of the rot elsewhere in Vietnam that I foresee in the next months, in context of shock, despair, and doubt of U.S. leadership: maybe not.

The April Crisis

The theme of these comments is that the worst lies ahead, much of it in the immediate future. Judgements on the "failure" of the VC offensive are premature even with respect to some of the most ambitious VC objectives: for that offensive is almost surely still in its beginning stages.

The best guess is that the VC Cadres are busy learning lessons from the initial attacks on how to do better next month -- reporting, analyzing, critiquing, modifying plans and organization and rehearsals (and all the while, recruiting, explaining, indoctrinating); while the Vietnamese bourgeois and officials, RVNAF officers, the peasants who fled to the cities and those

who stayed behind, will overwhelmingly in the next weeks and months come to learn lessons of despair, demoralization and bitterness.

The full impact of these shocks is not to be observed as yet. That must wait for the next round of VC attacks; for the picture of GVN abandonment and VC control of the countryside to become clear in the cities; for the VC blockades to tighten on the towns, and the VC mortaring, GVN unconcern, U.S. bombing, and VC agitators to work on the minds of the urban refugees; for officials to become preoccupied with their own security and their families; for the scale of attrition in RFNAF to become known, and for fantasies that the VC are weakened or discouraged to vanish; for all to absorb, and begin to adjust to, the thought that the war is not ever going to be won, and can be lost, whatever the Americans say or do. All this may take about a month or two. Little of it can be affected by anything the U.S. Government can do in that time.

In early or late April, then, it is rather likely that the word from Saigon to Washington will be: "Morale is about to collapse irrevocably in Saigon and in RVNAF -- with mass desertions, total apathy, deals with the VC, high-level or group defections, chaotic demonstrations, NLF-inspired 'Fronts,' a soaring black market, widespread attempts to leave the country -- unless the U.S. does something dramatic to demonstrate its total commitment and to hurt the VC badly." (In other words, a replay -- over 3 years and 500,000 U.S. troops later -- of the word in the fall of 1964 and early 1965.)

If Khe Sanh has not already been attacked by then, it will probably be in even greater danger than now, with tension increasing. New requests for more U.S. troops in SVN (whatever decision had been made in March) from MACV and the GVN would be inevitable. (Not, this time, to "reinforce success." If failure or success is to be measured relative to the most hopeful promises of commanders, as with the VC's Tet attacks, what is one to say of the current fate of MACV and CORDS plans and programs for 1967-68?) But beyond that, advice to the President may well grow to cut through our troubles with a drive north (or a "little invasion") to out-flank and encircle the North Vietnamese forces menacing Khe Sanh and the DMZ: redeeming U.S. military prowess and regaining Vietnamese confidence with a spectacular, Inchontype victory; relieving the pressure on Khe Sanh ("avoiding the alternatives of retreat or use of nuclear weapons"); and demoralizing the North Vietnamese "as a precursor to negotiations."

The events of March will generate an awful pressure on the President, tempting him to believe such promises, even as they discredit past promises by the same advisors. U.S. policy towards Indochina, once again, will be in crisis.